EXCHANGE

A Reply to Kanpol

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Barry Kanpol has written an interesting response to the article I wrote for the inaugural issue of this journal (Pennycook, 1990). In many ways, his essay does not require a reply since it is largely additive rather than oppositional in spirit. Nevertheless, since his response not only stimulated my thinking but also gave me certain cause for concern, I would like to take this opportunity to make a few comments. Kanpol (1990) argues that while he agrees with my call for a more political and critical applied linguistics, my approach falls short of providing a basis for critical practice since I both failed to consider some of the favorable aspects of modernism and the negative aspects of postmodernism and failed to generate a practical agenda for teaching. In response to these shortcomings, Kanpol proposes a "theory of 'similarity within difference,'" and provides examples from actual classes that exemplify this theory.

In responding to this, I would like first of all briefly to reiterate my own position. I am interested in postmodern thought not merely because it is part of the current intellectual climate (though you would not suspect this if you read only applied linguistic literature), but rather because it provides a position from which the "metanarratives" of applied linguistics can be brought into question. As Lyotard (1984) has argued in general, and as Cherryholmes (1988) has argued with respect to education, modernist and structuralist thought tends to be based on metanarratives that lay claim to rationality, linearity, progress, and control. While these grand narratives of modernist thought have doubtless brought major developments to our material and intellectual well-being, they also seem indelibly linked to some of the most appalling horrors of the modern world, from Auschwitz to Hiroshima, from sexist and racist bigotries to nationalist idolatries, from stark poverty to excessive wealth, from massive pollution to

Issues in Applied Linguistics
ISSN 1050-4273

Vol. 2 No. 2 1991 305-312

pointless consumption. I am at present trying to explore the relationships between the global spread of English, the growth of linguistics and applied linguistics as *disciplines* (retaining the ambiguity of the term), and global discourses of colonialism, imperialism, development, modernization, education, fundamentalism, and so on, discourses which, I believe, play an important role in the (re)production of global inequalities.

An attempt to deconstruct the metanarratives of applied linguistics, then, is not some obscurantist theoretical process or randomly destructive project aimed merely at the dissolution of the applied linguistic canon. Rather, as with other politically oriented deconstructive projects, it is an attempt to question received opinions and knowledges, to investigate power/knowledge relationships for and about language teaching. This project must also, of course, go beyond the deconstructive element to produce a reconstructive program. However, just as the deconstructive program is not randomly destructive, so this reconstructive process is not a laissez-faire, open-door policy to all other ideas. The insurgent knowledges that might emerge from their subjugation beneath the dominant metadiscourses (see Foucault, 1980) would in turn be submitted to critical scrutiny. It was to this end that I introduced a notion of *principled postmodernism*, a heuristic which I hoped might suggest a way of moving forward from a deconstructive project to a reconstructive one responsive to political and ethical questions. Thus, while I think Kanpol quite rightly points to the limitations of my tentatively posited principled postmodernism, it is perhaps not quite fair to assume that my interest in postmodernism leaves me only with questions of difference. My tentativeness was a product first of my article being intended only as a speculative attempt to sketch out some issues that I felt ought to be of concern to applied linguists, and second, of my reluctance to try to reintroduce some firm alternative, a different theory, a new narrative to replace the old.

Kanpol's central point, apart from the issue of generating a practical agenda (to which I shall return later), addresses this key point of postmodernism and poststructural debate as to how reconstructive projects are to be taken up. The deconstruction of grand narratives and universals, the attacks on metadiscourses, essentialist and foundationalist principles, and the profound questioning of claims to rationality, knowledge and truth, seem to leave us only with what at times appears to be but a fascination with fragmentation, a celebration of difference. What he is suggesting is

that an important way out of the dilemma posed by a seemingly paralyzing relativism is to theorize more carefully about similarity within difference. While at first glance this appears to make very good sense, I would like to undertake a slightly more critical reading of Kanpol's views by looking more carefully at his reading of modernism and postmodernism, by placing his views in a broader context and relating them to others' approaches to postmodern problems, by considering the examples he produces to exemplify his work, and finally by making a small defense in favor of at least the temporary retention of a notion of principled postmodernism as part of a critical applied linguistics.

Following Giroux, Kanpol argues for the retention of some of the "favorable aspects of modernism," namely, "the hope of enlightenment, a commitment to community . . . through individual reason and reflection, a unity of the individual and society in an ongoing dialectical vision of individual betterment, social progress, human emancipation, and human possibility" (p. 240). He quotes Giroux (1990) as suggesting that modernism provides a discourse based on "the principles of liberty, justice, and equality" (p. 240). Elsewhere, Giroux also talks of "retaining modernism's commitment to critical reason, agency, and the power of human beings to overcome human suffering" (Giroux, 1991, p. 37). But I find that these are rather strange readings of modernism and postmodernism. If, as a number of people have remarked (e.g., Hebdige, 1986), postmodernism is anti-utopian, this does not mean that it has rejected notions of justice, equality, agency, or progress. Rather, it has pluralized these notions, it has made them more slippery, it has made them contingent on historical and cultural conditions, it has allowed for no stable referent for these concepts and speaks with an inevitable tone of skepticism. We can still hope and struggle for a better world, but we can never be sure of a stable point from which to dream our utopian dreams; we can only talk of democracies, freedoms, rationalities, justices, equalities. As Lyotard (1984) argues, the defining quality of modernity is its acceptance of metanarratives, while the defining quality of postmodernity is its skepticism towards metanarratives. To argue for the retention of the "positive aspects of modernism" (Kanpol, p. 240) is not only to retain possibilities of agency, justice, and so on, but also to argue for the retention of these as metanarratives, for a universalizing and totalizing version of freedom or equality, and surely, therefore, for a metanarrative of similarity. Kanpol does

suggest, after all, that "we should search for modernistic similarities within postmodern differences" (p. 247).

Kanpol suggests that "to separate modernism and postmodernism as oppositional, mutually exclusive theoretical formulations simply reinforces division and antagonism among academics" (p. 247). I think he is certainly right that we need to avoid endless games of positioning and counter-positioning, but I am not so sure that modernism and postmodernism can be so easily reconciled as he suggests. Poststructuralist thought, as I see it, is fundamentally opposed to the dichotomizing practices of structuralism. I think that by suggesting that modernism and postmodernism can be bridged by a theory of similarity within difference, Kanpol may be reproducing the dichotomies and dialectics of structuralism and modernism which poststructuralism and postmodernism had sought to deconstruct. Thus, it seems to me that both Giroux and Kanpol wish to remain within the more comfortable confines of a modernist epistemology, using deconstructionist techniques where useful but retreating into a position that allows for stable and unitary definitions when the self-reflexive challenges of postmodernism start to raise difficult questions about their own projects. Thus, Giroux, faced by what some of us view as the demise of democracy in the U.S., retains his faith in the domains of politics and democracy as sites of struggle and argues for a critical pedagogy to sustain a radical democracy; and Kanpol, faced by the possibilities of growing diversity and possibly incommensurability, turns to a theory of similarity within difference.

Kanpol's argument is that postmodernism dwells too much on difference, thereby not allowing for consensus or community around a notion of similarity. In some ways this is the reverse side of liberal pluralism. While conservative views have tended to emphasize unitary forms of language, culture, and knowledge, in the form of standard languages and grammars, 'high' culture, and fixed curricula, more liberal views have looked for diversity within these fixed unities. Examples of this within applied linguistics would be the studies of variability in sociolinguistics and interlanguage. Thus, the debate around standards in English as an international language is framed between Quirk's (e.g., 1985) conservativism and Kachru's (e.g., 1985) liberal pluralism. A postmodern stance, by contrast, starts with a questioning of the ontological status of 'language' or 'interlanguage,' or 'English as an international language,' and seeks to investigate the discursive

construction of such concepts. In such a deconstruction, we arrive at a notion of people engaged in acts of communication and identity (for a similar theme see Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985) without assuming the a priori existence of a language. Kanpol appears to be suggesting that having arrived at this dangerous point of difference, we need a theory of similarity to regroup. But if this similarity is not itself open to deconstruction, if these are "modernistic similarities," then Kanpol's position seems to come dangerously close to a modernist liberal pluralism.

A second point of concern about Kanpol's theory is the confidence with which he asserts our need for it. While I think there are good grounds for a degree of confidence in the importance of deconstructive work, I think we should be more cautious about the ways in which we approach reconstructive work. One of the hopes I have for a postmodern epistemology is that it may bring more academic humility. There is no longer a space from which to claim to have the answer, to have developed a theory that can explain comprehensively, for all knowledges remain partial and interested. This, I think, can help oppose the fossilization of thinking into methods and models as well as oppose the often pretentious claims to have a 'theory' of, for example, second language acquisition. Once again, we can see the modernist conservative/liberal divide in second language acquisition theory between those, such as Krashen (e.g., 1982), who easily conflate 'a theory' with 'theory' in general, and the more pluralist views held, for example, by Ellis (1985), who is not only interested in variability in interlanguage but also lists his own theory as one among several. My concern, however, is not with mediating between conservative and liberal pluralist modernism but more with the whole issue of making claims to have a theory: what are the effects of such claims to truth and knowledge?

Furthermore, Kanpol's theory needs to be understood relative to a number of other reconstructive projects which start from a more overtly political stance. Giroux (1991), for example, also asks "how to develop a theory of difference that is not at odds with a politics of solidarity" (p. 32). His emphasis is on developing a critical or border pedagogy that can educate a critical citizenry capable of participating in a radical democracy. In a different vein, Simon (forthcoming) has been exploring the difficult terrain of ethics, asking how we can reconstruct an ethical project when the metadiscourses of morality have been deconstructed. Rather than concentrating on the formally political domain (as does Giroux), Simon has been working with a more Foucauldian notion of power

as both indissolubly linked to knowledge and permeating all social relationships. From this more poststructuralist point of view, questions of culture and knowledge production come to the fore, and questions of community and solidarity can be framed, for example by seeing educators as "cultural workers" who can form bonds with other people involved in cultural production. Welch's (1985) "feminist theology of liberation" seeks to create "communities of resistance and solidarity" through reconstituted feminist and Christian practices. What this and other feminist work in particular is working with is the relationship between "the primacy of the particular" and the need for "redeemed communities" (pp. 74-75). Fraser & Nicholson (1990) argue that it is through an emphasis on cultural and historical specificity that a "pragmatic and fallibilistic" postmodern-feminist theory can be created (p. 35). Their argument that contemporary feminist political practice is a "matter of alliances rather than one of unity around a universally shared interest or identity" (p. 35) might in some ways be construed as the same as Kanpol's "similarity within difference." The important difference, however, is that these "alliances," these "communities of resistance and solidarity," emerge through political struggle, not through a theory that draws them together.

Kanpol also criticized me for not attempting "to generate a practical agenda to connect with [my] grand theory" (p. 240). Apart from the fact that I am by no means trying to construct a "grand theory," I think we should also be very wary of attempting to "generate a practical agenda" from our theoretical work. While I welcome Kanpol's introduction of classroom practice into what has possibly been to many an overly theoretical discussion, we should be cautious about deriving such practice from the theoretical. Many of us are trying to develop critical practices in our language teaching, and I feel examples should emerge from our own self-reflexive explorations of our teaching, rather than be generated by theory. As for the examples that Kanpol provides, I find that these too leave me somewhat uneasy. While the use of text to recall history and the shared experiences of students, the use of film to question stereotypes and students' similar confrontations with these stereotypes, and the use of cooperative learning as a challenge to individualism, are all useful practices for ESL classes, they do not appear to differ much from what liberal educators have always been doing. The point here is that postmodern and poststructuralist thought has a view of history that locates our own histories and memories within complex discursive fields and sees stereotypes as

aspects of discourses embedded in texts and institutions. These cannot be easily approached, confronted, and dealt with as if histories and stereotypes were easily readable stories of truth and obfuscation.

Kanpol seems to talk too readily of "a sense of community" growing out of "similarity within differences" (p. 245), of students' stereotypes being challenged, of similarity being "tolerance, team effort, sharing" and differences being "likes and dislikes" (p. 246). He makes puzzling statements such as "teachers at all levels of education have the power not only to help students assimilate into mainstream culture; they can also use 'assimilation' as a social and political tool to transform consciousness by bringing into focus the similarities within differences" (p. 247). What I think is crucial in all this--and this is one of the problems with Habermas, whose faith in modernism Kanpol approvingly references--is that we need to understand appeals to similarity and consensus within the larger discursive structures that support them. A notion of similarity, therefore, based (it would seem) on an assumption of intersubjective understanding and common experience, needs to be understood in terms of the discursive structures that make such an assumption possible. Understanding, experience, consensus, or similarity are always mediated and produced through discourse.

In conclusion, I would like to suggest that while Kanpol has initiated an interesting area for debate and has rightly pointed to some shortcomings in my work, his theory of similarity within difference should at best be seen as one amongst many possible ways of establishing solidarity within a postmodern epistemology. For myself, I am still struggling with questions of how a principled postmodernism might work, of how we can understand ethical and political ways of pursuing a critical applied linguistics. As I have said, I retain this phrase as a heuristic that may be of help in engaging these issues; I do not want to put it forward as a theory or suggest that we all need to be doing principled postmodernism. And in doing reconstructive work, I think we need to be extremely cautious, to proceed tentatively, and to learn to listen. If new voices are to emerge, subjugated knowledges to be insurrected, we need to accept that things may be very messy, reflecting the "soupiness" of the world that has so often been disregarded by the disciplining effects of the social sciences. In his editorial to the inaugural edition of this journal, Antony Kunnan (1990) spoke of the "unsung melodies of applied linguistics" and a Bakhtinian notion of polyphonic voices. I think this may be a period when a certain

anarchistic polyphony might best suit applied linguistics before we regroup and talk too much of similarity or consensus.

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By the time this response is published, **Alastair Pennycook** should have finished his doctoral dissertation, *The Cultural Politics of Teaching English in the World* and be looking for a job. Having taught, read, and travelled widely, he is keen to find new and diverse worlds to explore.